

Circle of Trust

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Summary: Sequel to 'No More Secrets.' Lewis has just been offered a three month lecture tour with a mysterious scientist, Zane and Rikki are trying to keep their identities a secret from their suspicious coworkers, and Bella and Will are trying to plan an impossible wedding. What happens when Laurie gets blackmailed, a secret is exposed, and two faces from the past return?

## 1. Where we are now

**\*\*Hey guys! I hope everyone had a wonderful holiday season! As promised, here is the first chapter of the sequel to 'No More Secrets.' It picks up about two months after the last story left off. I hope you enjoy! :) As always, thanks for reading!\*\***

\* \* \*

><p>The misty coastal air smelled unbelievably fresh as Rikki and Zane stepped out of the car. They peered up at the smallish looking house in front of them, at the end of a quiet neighborhood street. The house in was painted a nondescript light brown and had a white mailbox out front.<p>

Zane walked around the car and put a tired arm around Rikki's shoulders. "What about this one?"

"You already know I love it, we've been here three times." Rikki said wistfully. I don't know, Zane, are you sure we're ready for a house?"

"The apartment is too small." Zane recited. "We know we can afford to move, and we'd both be glad for the extra room."

"It's further away from the ocean." Rikki said sadly.

"Only by a few miles." Zane reminded her. "And you hardly ever go into the ocean nowadays."

"I don't want anyone to see me." Rikki shrugged, trying to act like it didn't bother her to live so close to the sea and not be able to go out in it.

"We aren't going to be caught." Zane gently tucked a strand of brown hair behind Rikki's ear. His own had grown much longer. "No one has a clue who we are."

Rikki turned back to look at the house. "Maybe we'll be ready to move in a couple more months. I just hope this place is still available."

"It isn't available now." Zane cleared his throat. "Someone already bought it."

"What?" Rikki's heart sank. "Well then why did you bring me here? Why..." Her voice faded as she looked at the smirk spreading across Zane's face. "You didn't." She accused him.

"I did!" Zane's face burst into a grin as he picked Rikki up and spun her around. He pulled a set of keys from his pocket. "Welcome home, Rikki."

"Zane!" Rikki smacked him playfully as she ran up the front walk. "I can't believe you would do something so-"

"Romantic?" Zane caught her at the front door and nipped gently on Rikki's ear. He unlocked the door and held it open for Rikki to walk inside.

Rikki looked around the familiar house, hardly believing that they got to live there. They'd been casually visiting open houses for about a month now, and for some reason Rikki had always found herself drawn to this one. It had a warmth that reminded her of home. Maybe it was the layout, which was very similar to Cleo's house. It had come fully furnished, and Rikki already felt more at home here than she had in their apartment. She walked over to the living room window, peering up the street.

"And not a reporter in sight." She exhaled.

"See?" Smugness was evident in Zane's voice as he stood beside her. He took Rikki's hand in his as his tone softened. "I told you. We've done everything right, Rikki. Fake names, fake histories, our neighbors won't even know we're Australian." He said in a perfect American accent. "This is going to be perfect."

Rikki couldn't help but agree with him. The money Laurie had collected for them had made all of this possible. The first thing they'd done after they landed in America was change their appearance. Rikki had dyed her hair a chestnut-brown and cut it into a choppy, short style. She donned a fake pair of glasses as well. Zane had lightened his a bit and went several days without shaving. Add a pair of sunglasses wherever he went and he was unrecognizable.

Too both of their surprises, it seemed to have worked. No one spared a second glance for the couple as they walked down the street. On Laurie's advice, they'd landed in Atlanta, Georgia and then rented a car to drive to North Carolina. There was a much closer airport to the Wilmington coast, but this would do an even better job of erasing

their trail.

"Ah..." Rikki sighed with pleasure as she dropped down onto the bed in their new room. "I've never been so comfortable." She rolled onto her stomach, looking up at Zane with deep eyes. "Join me?"

"Don't tempt me." Zane stood in the doorway, a grin playing at the corners of his mouth. "Come here." He said softly.

"Why?" Rikki said slowly as she walked towards him.

"Close your eyes." Zane turned her so that he was guiding her steps. "I have something to show you."

"Ok..." Rikki obeyed and timidly walked in the direction Zane was pointing her.

Zane spoke as they walked. "We agreed that this house was even more perfect because it was at the end of a street, do you remember?"

Wordlessly, Rikki nodded.

"Less traffic, nobody really pays that much attention to the house at the end of the road." Zane continued. "And as you know, there's an empty two acres of land attached to the back of this house. The realtor kept telling us it would be the perfect backyard if we ever decided to have children." Zane laughed slightly as he guided Rikki through a doorway.

"We've stopped." Rikki noted. "Can I open my eyes now?"

Zane took a couple of steps away from Rikki. He wanted to have a perfect view of her. "Open them." He whispered, barely able to contain his excitement.

Rikki gasped as she looked at what had once been two acres of nothing but grass and trees.

A glittering pool of blue water sent flashes of teal onto the back side of the house. But it wasn't just an ordinary swimming pool. It was like an oasis, the perfect memory of home. The pool was enormous and oddly shaped, not a perfect oval. It curved in and out, and in the middle was a small island-like structure. The whole thing was lined by a tall wooden fence, so that no one could see through.

"Come on." Zane dove into the water and swam for the sandy-colored structure in the middle.

Rikki followed him, relishing the feeling of freedom as she changed for the first time in a week. Zane appeared to swim underneath the small island. Curiously, Rikki followed him.

Sure enough, the island floated on top of the water, suspended in place by heavy cabling. Rikki surfaced underneath, gasping as she looked around. Inside was a miniature version of the Moon Pool at Mako Island.

"Zane..." Rikki breathed. She had never felt quite so touched. She

put a hand over her mouth, trying not to tear up.

"I just thought you could use a touch of home." Zane pushed Rikki's now-blonde hair off her shoulders. He looked around at the water. "It's fully heated, you can go swimming even in the dead of winter." He chuckled. "The real estate agent thought I was nuts, but I just decided-"

Rikki stopped him, effectively silencing him with a long kiss as tears of happiness ran down her cheeks.

\* \* \*

><p>Back in Australia, Laurie, Bella, and Will were just leaving the grand opening celebration of a new marine museum in town. Cameras snapped as they waved and made their way out to their waiting limousine. They were still photographed everywhere they went, but there didn't seem to be as many cameramen anymore. Or maybe they'd just gotten used to it. The three of them had settled into something of a celebrity status to the whole world, but their town seemed to slowly be getting used to having them around.<p>

They settled themselves into the limo and directed the driver to take them to the marine park, where they'd left their cars.

"Thanks." Laurie tipped the driver as they stepped out.

The driver politely accepted before directing the car through the heavily guarded exit.

"We set a date." Bella aid excitedly, unable to keep it a secret from Laurie any longer.

"Sh..." Laurie aid immediately, casting a wary eye around the empty park. He hadn't heard anything further from the sender of the cryptic letter, but he had to be careful. He quickly unlocked his office door and ushered them inside before giving Bella the 'ok' to continue.

"June 10th." Bella blurted out, unable to stop giggling excitedly.

"And you're sticking with this one this time?" Laurie raised his eyebrows.

"Absolutely." Will nodded proudly. "And we altered the guest list again too. Everything is going to be totally low-key. We don't want the media to find out about our plans."

"Not again." Bella said guiltily. She'd already accidentally told a reporter the wedding details of the first wedding they'd planned. He was posing as a florist and Bella didn't think for a second that he might be secretly recording her.

Laurie swallowed nervously. Someone out there knew something, or at least claimed to. Laurie just didn't have any idea who that person was. If the media found out about the girls' abilities they might not be quite so accepting of them. Laurie forced himself to refocus on Bella, who had been chattering away in the meantime.

"So that's why we decided that teal and ivory would make the perfect wedding colors." She gushed.

"I'm happy for you two." Laurie said genuinely as he checked his watch. "The park opens for evening session in just a few minutes. Are you two hanging around today?"

Will and Bella frequently spent time at the marine park greeting fans and posing for pictures. Security was so tight that it was one of the only places they felt completely safe doing so, and the kids loved getting to meet a real life mermaid.

"We'll stay for a couple hours." Will looked to Bella, who nodded enthusiastically.

The pair finally headed for home after staying a total of five hours at the park. There had been a lot of people wanting pictures tonight. Bella and Will knew that their presence was a huge draw for the crowds, and they liked to help out the park as much as possible. They fell happily onto their cream colored couch and flipped on the television.

"Did you send the new date and location to Rikki and Cleo yet?" Will asked.

"Not yet." Bella laid her head on Will's shoulder. "I wanted to talk to you about the location."

"And?" Will looked down at her in surprise.

"What if we got married on Mako Island?" Bella asked. "I know it's kinda out of the way for you humans, but it's a pretty special place to all of us."

Will nodded, mulling it over in his head. "If that's what you want, that's where the wedding will be." He said finally.

"Excellent." Bella settled in, moving closer over next to Will. "You know what else I want?" She said mischievously, playing with Will's belt buckle.

Will jumped up and raced for the bedroom without another word. Bella laughed as she ran after him.

\* \* \*

><p>"Excuse me, Mr. McArtney?" A petite redhead poked her head into Lewis's office.<p>

Lewis looked up wearily from the stack of papers in front of him. "Yes, Lindy?" His floppy blonde hair fell into his eyes as he stifled a yawn.

"I just have a few more case study reports for you to read over." Lindy said apologetically as she set a thick folder on the top of an already full inbox.

"Yippee." Lewis grimaced. "It's going to take me months to get through all of these."

"People are anxious for your opinion, I guess." Lindy offered. "Oh, and this came for you." She held out an official looking manilla envelope.

Lewis snatched it out of her hand, making her jump. "Yes... yes... yes..." He murmured excitedly. He ripped open the envelope and furiously read the letter inside. His eyes were bright with excitement as he looked up at his assistant. "Do you have any idea what this is?"

"Um, no sir, I don't." Lindy shook her head.

"I need to go." Lewis threw on his jacket, grabbed his keys, and ran out of his office, leaving paperwork fluttering to the ground in his wake.

"See you later then?" Lindy called after him.

Lewis ran down the familiar paved path until he reached the lake in the center of campus. "Cleo!" He shouted out over the water, drawing a few bemused looks from passing biologists. Lewis dashed around to the other side of the small body of water. "C'mon, Cleo, where are you?"

"I'm right here, silly." Cleo surfaced a few feet away, propping herself up on the sandy bank with her elbows. "What's going on?"

Lewis ran to her, sliding down on his stomach in the wet sand. "You'll never believe-"

"Lewis, your suit!" Cleo gestured for him to stand up. "It'll be ruined."

"I don't care!" Lewis laughed. "Cleo, I got it." He held up the letter.

Cleo's eyes widened as she realized what he was talking about. "You got the lecture tour?" She said excitedly.

"Yes!" Lewis leaned forward to kiss Cleo, not caring that he was in 3 inches of murky lake water. "We leave in 3 weeks."

"Lewis, I'm so proud of you." Cleo kissed him hard, twining her fingers in his hair.

About two weeks ago, notice had gone out that Brian Helmsley, Lewis's favorite Marine Biologist in the entire world, was going on a lecture tour of the seven continents, and that he would be holding satellite interviews to find a research assistant/fellow presenter. Lewis had interviewed five days ago and had been anxiously waiting for a reply ever since.

"I've got to call Laurie." Lewis jumped back to his feet. "See you at home?"

"You got it." Cleo smiled up at him before ducking back under the water. She needed a few minutes to herself. Against her will, a knot had begun to form in her stomach. They'd only just gotten really settled here in California, in a huge facility specifically altered

for their comfort. And now they would be going on a three month tour, touching on every continent. Never being settled anywhere. Cleo tried to be happy, but she was more than a little tired of the moving around. It was hard for her to make friends because of what she was. She'd only recently become close with one of the daughters of a teacher here at the center. She and Toryn spent most of their free time together when Lewis and Toryn's father were busy working.

Cleo had been all too happy to follow Lewis to America. She had felt somewhat like she owed him for all of the help he'd been during the great mermaid revelation. But now... it just didn't feel as right. Cleo was painfully homesick, and though she loved Lewis, she was afraid he might have to make this next voyage on his own.

\* \* \*

><p>"Here we are." A beautiful blonde girl stepped out of a taxi. "It feels good to be back, doesn't it?"<p>

"This was always my favorite home." Her companion said, pulling two large suitcases out of the taxi.

"The town who brought mermaids into the world." The blonde read the subscript on the town sign. "I don't think I really believed it until we got here. They're all out in the open now. Well," She corrected herself. "At least the three of them are."

"I'll follow you to the house?" The brown haired man gestured to the neighborhood in front of them. "It's been so long, I don't remember which one is yours."

"Follow me, Ash." Emma said as she pulled her sunglasses down over her eyes. She started walking down the street, a smile across her face.

"You're right, you know." Ash breathed in deeply. "It is awfully good to be back."

## 2. Getting Places

Bella's phone rang, waking her up way earlier than she'd intended to open her eyes that day.

"Hello?" She murmured, rubbing sleep out of her eyes. "Sure, Laurie. I'll be there in thirty minutes. No, no trouble at all."

"What's up?" Will rolled over sleepily, wincing at the bright sunlight.

"Laurie needs me at the park again today." Bella reluctantly pulled herself out of bed, stretching her arms high over her head as she yawned.

"Again?" Will's brow furrowed slightly. "But you were there so long yesterday."

"I know." Bella leaned over to kiss Will's cheek. "But two of his dolphin trainers called in sick with that stomach bug going around. He needs something to replace the dolphin show with."

"So he's replacing it with a mermaid show?" Will sat up, his hair a halo of blonde around his head.

"I guess so." Bella dressed quickly, throwing on a simple green dress. "I don't know how long I'll be there, I'll text you."

"I may head that way, too." Will also stood. "Just to take in the show."

"You don't have to, you could stay here and get some rest." Bella looped her arms around his neck. "It's been a busy week."

"I know, but I like being near you." Will said simply.

"Well then I'll see you there." Bella smiled, taking a second to kiss him before heading downstairs and out of the house.

\* \* \*

><p>The marine park was already bustling with activity when Bella's driver pulled through the gates. At first, Bella had been embarrassed at the idea of having her own personal driver, but it soon became obvious that it was a necessity.<p>

"Thanks, Brooks." She said brightly as he pulled up to the secure entrance.

"See ya later, Bella." The young man tipped his hat to her as she hopped out.

Bella quickly swiped her security key and walked inside. "Laurie!" She saw him just turning the corner in front of her.

Laurie whipped around when he heard his name. "Bella, I'm so glad you're here." Relief was evident in his voice. "Jilly called out too, \_everyone\_ is sick. Thank you so much for coming down."

"It's no problem, Laurie." Bella rubbed his arm reassuringly. "Just tell me what you want me to do?"

An hour later, Bella was sitting down behind a long table. Instead of bi-hourly dolphin shows, the park was offering a q & a with Bella, followed by a mermaid demonstration. Bella was more than happy to help, though she'd been looking forward to a day off. The seats filled quickly as spectators gawked at her and snapped pictures. Bella was used to it, though it always made her feel a tad self conscious.

Will swiped his own security badge, walking right into the small stadium. He shook his head as he watched Bella enthusiastically answering a little girl's question. Bella was meant for this, celebrity, that is.

"How's it going?" Will leaned on the back counter, where Laurie was keeping tabs on the crowd.

"She's a lifesaver, Will." Laurie patted him on the back before turning back towards the stage. "I don't know what I would have done without her today."



"I hear you." Will nodded.

"Excuse me?" A female voice came from behind Laurie.

"Yes?" Laurie turned, expecting it to be a patron who needed directions. His eyes widened as he placed the face in front of him. "Emma?"

"You haven't forgotten." Emma brightened as he said her name. She'd half expected him not to have remembered her.

"It's been so long." Laurie pulled her in for a tight hug. "How have you been?"

"Oh, just fine." Emma returned the hug, stepping back after a moment. "I would ask what's new with you, but..." She gestured to the mermaid banners. "I guess it's self explanatory, huh?"

"Yeah." Laurie sheepishly ran a hand through his hair. "It's amazing, isn't it? \_Mermaids\_" He shook his head. "It's still so hard to believe."

"It's hard to believe, alright." Emma said tightly, quickly plastering a smile on her face. "Well, I'll let you get back to your conversation, I just wanted to say hi."

"Oh, you should meet Will." Laurie gestured beside him. "Will, this is Emma. Emma, this is Will. He dates Bella." Laurie nodded toward the stage, where Bella was about to dive into the glass-walled pool.

"It's nice to meet you." Will shook her hand, smiling warmly at the blonde girl. Emma... the name sounded vaguely familiar, maybe he'd heard Cleo mention her once?

"Nice to meet you as well." Emma said politely. "Well, I don't want to miss the show!" She waved before heading back towards the stands.

"How's Laurie?" Ash asked as she took her seat beside him.

"Famous." Emma couldn't keep the bitterness from her voice.

The pair watched as Bella posed for a few last pictures before diving into the water. The crowd cheered and snapped a million pictures as she changed in front of them.

"You know, I don't think I totally believed it until now." Emma spoke quietly. "I cannot believe they've gone public."

"Where are the others? Cleo and Rikki?" Ash craned his neck to look through the crowds.

"I don't know, I haven't seen them." Emma also took a look, but didn't see any sign of them. "Let's get out of here, I've seen enough."

The sun was setting by the time Bella made her way out of her final show. Will caught up to her at the edge of the stage, throwing his

arm around her waist.

"Sorry that took all day, I just didn't want to let anyone down." Bella leaned a tired head against Will's shoulder as they walked toward their waiting car.

"That's what I love about you." Will kissed her forehead. "Do I get you to myself for the rest of the night?"

"You betcha." Bella smiled tiredly up at him.

Bella was sound asleep by the time the car pulled into the driveway. Will whispered goodnight to Brooks, scooped Bella into his arms, and tucked her into her warm bed.

\* \* \*

><p>"You'll begin here in California..." The male voice continued droning. "Then you'll hit twelve more states over the next two weeks. The standard biological research lecture will be the standard, feel free to talk about any subject, mermaids specifically. From there you'll head south to Mexico..."<p>

Cleo blinked hard, trying to keep her eyes from staying closed. She'd been sitting in this conference room for the last hour listening to Mr. Kemp explain the terms of the lecture tour to Lewis. It wasn't exciting, in fact, it sounded dead boring, but Lewis had asked Cleo to come to the meeting, so she had. But now, in this warm room, listening to a monotone voice, it was all she could do to stay awake.

Lewis sat at full attention, writing down every word Mr. Kemp said. He was so excited for this tour he could hardly stand it. Cleo sighed as she looked at him. She was being completely supportive, though she had a sick feeling in her stomach every time she thought about three months on the road.

"And you'll finish up in your home continent, Australia. Of course, we'll set up very secure five star accommodations at each location." Mr. Kemp was still talking. "Can I answer any questions?"

Lewis immediately took a deep breath, opening his mouth to speak as his eyes slid over to Cleo. He deflated, swallowing his question. "Nope!" He said happily. "I'll email you if I think of anything."

"Well then it looks like you have all your information." Mr. Kemp smiled wryly. "You ship out in three days."

"Excellent." Lewis enthusiastically shook Mr. Kemp's hand.

Cleo was quiet on the walk back to their on-campus home, letting Lewis jabber about details of the lecture tour. Her guilt gnawed at her, she knew she needed to talk to Lewis soon.

"And don't worry," Lewis continued. "There will be plenty for you to do, I'm sure you'll have tons of demonstrations to do--"

"Lewis..." Cleo sank onto their couch, resting her head in her

hands.

"\_And\_ we may even get to meet the royal family while we're in London!" Lewis didn't pause.

"Lewis." Cleo said slightly louder.

"But even if we don't, it'll be so cool to see England, oooooo and \_Paris...\_" Lewis was still talking.

"I don't want to go." Cleo blurted out loudly, immediately regretting the outburst.

Lewis froze. "What?"

"Sit down, I need to talk to you." Cleo patted the couch beside her.

"What do you mean, you don't want to go?" Lewis sat next to her, leaning forward on his elbows.

"Lewis, with all that's been going on these last few months, I'm just not ready." Cleo said gently. "I mean, California is just started to feel a little bit like a home, they're finally getting used to us here, I've made a few friends... I'm just not ready to pull everything up again." She looked at Lewis timidly, waiting for his response.

"I understand." Lewis said blankly, his expression unreadable.

"But listen," Cleo spoke quickly. "You're going to have so much fun, you won't even notice I'm not there, really."

Lewis frowned, turning to look at her. "I'm not going without you, Cleo."

"No, no, you're definitely going." Cleo said firmly. "You have to, you've been dying to go."

"I don't feel comfortable leaving you alone." Lewis shook his head. "Too much could happen while I'm not here. I love you, Cleo. I don't want to be separated, not when we could help it."

"I'll tell you what." Cleo had a sudden inspiration. "How's this. When you leave for you lecture tour I'll go to Australia. I'll hang out with Bella and Will and Laurie for three months, totally safe, and I'll be there when you get there. It'll be so fast you'll barely miss me."

"I'll miss you every second." Lewis thought about her proposal. "I suppose... If you're just in Australia... it might work."

"Perfect." Cleo felt herself getting excited to go back home. "I have to call Bella, she'll be so excited!"

Lewis sighed as he pulled open his laptop. He shot Mr. Kemp a quick email, letting him know about the change of plans. Lewis tried not to be too disappointed, but the fact was that he had really been looking forward to taking this trip with Cleo. His computer bleeped, alerting him that Mr. Kemp had already responded.

"That was fast." Lewis muttered as he opened the email.

'Mr. McArtney,

>I am truly sorry to hear that Miss Sertori will not be joining you on this tour. Unfortunately, her presence was a requirement for you to fulfill your contract. After all, pre sale tickets to the lectures guarantee the presence of a mermaid. While your work is stimulating and groundbreaking, it is not enough to support a seven continent tour on it's own. Let's meet to discuss this further.<br>Kemp.'

Lewis's heart fell to the pit of his stomach as he read the curt email. He immediately snapped the computer shut as Cleo came bouncing down the stairs.

"Bella is \_thrilled\_." She said happily, jumping onto the couch and hugging Lewis tightly. "Thank you so much, Lewis. You have no idea how much I appreciate you going without me."

Lewis held her tightly, trying not to fall apart as disappointment coursed through him.

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><p>"Wake up, sleepy head." Zane shook Rikki gently. "Time to go to work."<p>

Rikki was starting a new job, working as a secretary in an office building. Zane had been working at a little hotel about a mile away, but Rikki had quickly gotten bored just sitting at home.

"Thanks." Rikki mumbled as she pulled herself out of the warm bed. She quickly fixed her hair, stepped into a smart pair of slacks with a rose colored blouse, and made her way downstairs. She slipped on her thick-framed fake glasses as she walked, quickly making a pot of coffee.

"Have fun today, Brittany." Zane kissed Rikki before walking out the door.

"You too, Chris." Rikki called after him.

The office was uninteresting, but it was work. Rikki's first day was passing slowly until her manager told her she was free to take a lunch break.

Several other young adults were already in the small cafeteria eating. A young man waved to catch Rikki's attention.

"You must be the new secretary." He smiled at her. "I'm Dan, come sit with us."

He seemed a bit cocky, but he was friendly enough. Rikki took a seat at their table, trying to remember everyone's names as they introduced themselves.

"Alli, Kurt, Emily, Sasha, and Dan, right?" She repeated. "I'm Brittany."

"Hey, Brit." Sasha flipped her long blonde hair over her shoulder. "We were just talking about all this mermaid nonsense they've been spouting from Australia."

"It isn't nonsense!" Kurt argued. "They have plenty of proof, it's not just a fuzzy picture. There are actual real girls this time."

"Yeah, I'll believe it when I see it." Emily said dryly.

"Then watch this!" Kurt held his phone out to her. "Video proof. Bella Hartley changing from human to mermaid."

"Could just be computerized." Alli said dismissively.

"Yeah, and where are the other two? Aren't there supposed to be three?" Sasha shot in.

"Well, Bella is in Australia still, Cleo Sertori is in California, right here in the US." Kurt raised his eyebrows impressively.

"She's not doing shows or anything, though." Alli answered.

"No, she's at some scientific institute or something like that." Kurt sighed.

"And what about the third? The one who disappeared? Lyndsay?" Sasha frowned.

"Rikki." Dan put in.

Rikki automatically turned to him, instantly flushing scarlet for being so careless. He hadn't been addressing her, he had been correcting the name of the third mermaid.

Dan was looking at her curiously. "You know, you kind of look like her." The rest of the table burst out laughing at his comment, but he was looking at Rikki thoughtfully. "Just take off those glasses for a second."

"No!" Rikki jumped to her feet, causing the whole table to look at her. "Sorry, just remembered something I have to do." She took off down the hall, getting as far from the gossiping group as she could.

### 3. Secrets and More Secrets

"But are you \_ sure \_ it's ok with you?" Cleo asked Lewis for the tenth time as they walked to the reasearch lab that morning.

"Of course." Lewis kept his eyes on the pavement in front of him as he walked, doing his best to keep his tone light. "I want you to be happy, Cleo."

"I know, I just want to make sure you're happy too." Cleo grabbed ahold of his hand as they walked. "But you're positive it's ok with you if I go ahead to wait for you back home in Australia?"

Lewis swallowed hard. He hadn't told Cleo that the lecture tour was

cancelled if she didn't accompany him, the whole thing make him sick. "Just get your things packed. Don't worry about me."

Cleo heard a slightly sad tone in Lewis's voice, causing a lump of guilt to rise in her chest. For the hundredth time she second guessed her decision. Still, she and Lewis prided themselves on their level of honesty with one another. He wouldn't tell her to go if her really didn't want her to, right?

"Ok." Cleo pecked him on the lips. She watched as he walked into his building, waiting for him to wave goodbye before starting back towards home. In spite of everything, she was really excited. She had several phone calls to make.

\* \* \*

><p>"Mr. McArtney, I'm glad you stopped by." Mr. Kemp looked up from his computer as Lewis walked into his office.<p>

"Listen, Mr. Kemp, you've got to let me explain." Lewis began without hesitation. "I've been researching mermaids for almost five years now. I've got data on all four mermaids, with varying results on each of them, and I have information no one else has ever had access to. Even without Cleo, I am still the most educated on the subject of mer life and I am willing to work my ass off to prove it to you. This is all I've wanted and--"

"Lewis, please." Mr. Kemp interrupted, gesturing for Lewis to have a seat across from him. He waited until Lewis had taken the chair before taking a deep breath to speak.

Lewis swallowed hard, praying for a miracle.

"You're a brilliant scientist." Mr. Kemp spoke gently. "One of the finest I've come across. And I've seen your notes. Your research is... well, it's visionary. Your work with the mermaids has opened up fields of science I didn't think I'd see in my lifetime." He paused, examining his folded hands before continuing. "That said... without a mermaid as part of your lecture, I'm afraid this institute cannot justify the type of lecture tour we were planning. The bottom line is that people don't care about scientific research. They want to see some fins. I'm sorry for being so blunt, son."

"No... it's alright." Lewis said sullenly. He stood, extending a hand to Mr. Kemp. "Thank you for seeing me, sir."

"We still want you to do the tour." Mr. Kemp shook his hand firmly. "If Cleo changes her mind, please let me know immediately."

Lewis nodded before turning to walk out of the large office. He wanted to punch a wall, but he used every ounce of self control to stay composed.

Mr. Kemp watched as the door swung closed behind Lewis, then reached for the phone. He dialed it quickly, waiting for the other line to pick up. "Hello, Baringer? Kemp here." He toyed with his watch as he spoke. "I've just had a meeting with Lewis McArtney. He's told me something rather interesting. You know the mermaids, yes? Right, Rikki Chadwick, Cleo Sertori, and Isabella Hartley. Well..." A smile played at the corner of Mr. Kemp's mouth. "Apparently there's a

fourth. Yes, that\_'s\_ right. There's a \_fourth \_mermaid."

\* \* \*

><p>"I'm telling you, Zane. They recognized me within the first ten minutes." Rikki propped herself up on her elbow, looking down at Zane.<p>

Zane groaned as he turned over in the bed, rolling over to look back at her. "You're being silly." He said sleepily. "They were just teasing you."

"No, they weren't." Rikki pinched him slightly. "This guy, Kurt, was talking all about the mermaids. He knew each of our names, he knew where we all were--"

"Except you." Zane put in.

"Right." Rikki agreed reluctantly. "Except me. But then this other guy, Dan, he knew what I looked like. He told me to take off my glasses."

"Look." Zane took her hand in his, rubbing her knuckles gently with his thumb. "It will look way more suspicious if you work one day, then disappear the second someone mentions mermaids. Right?"

"Zane..." Rikki shook her head. "I just have a bad feeling. I don't think my disguise is fooling anyone."

"If that were the case we'd have news crews knocking on the door as we speak." Zane said matter of factly. "Just try one more day. If you really feel uncomfortable then you can come up with some bogus reason to get yourself fired or something." He kissed her hand gently. "We're both just really paranoid. But we've done a good job, Rik. No one knows who we are."

"Ok." Rikki nodded, still not sure she felt good about this. She leaned in for a kiss, then climbed out of the bed.

The office was bustling as Rikki walked inside that morning. She took her seat behind the front desk, looking around carefully to see if anyone was pointing at her.

"Brittany!" A voice came from just behind her, making Rikki jump.

Rikki turned around quickly, ready to defend herself.

"Hey, sorry I scared you." Sasha held her hands up, laughing at Rikki's reaction. "I was just saying good morning."

Rikki sat, frozen, as she tried to catch her breath. Her heart was pounding hard in her chest as she forced a smile onto her face. "Right. Good morning. Sasha, right?"

"You got it." Sasha leaned across Rikki's desk, fishing through the candy bowl in front of her. "How are you liking it here so far?"

"Oh, it's... fine." Rikki finished lamely.

"Yeah, it's super boring." Sasha laughed as she popped a blueberry sucker into her mouth. "But the people are all pretty cool. See you at lunch?"

"Um, maybe." Rikki didn't want to commit to anything yet. She cast an anxious eye around the office, checking for Dan. No sign of him so far.

"I'll see you there." Sasha didn't appear to have heard Rikki's answer. "Have a nice day, Brit."

"You too." Rikki collapsed over her desk, still working to catch her breath.

\* \* \*

><p>"What's gotten into you?" Zane asked with a grin, watching as Rikki shoveled food into her mouth.<p>

"I didn't have lunch today." Rikki said though a mouthful of half chewed hamburger. "I'm \_starving\_."

"Why didn't you eat?" Zane wrapped his arms around her waist, holding her tightly.

"I'm playing the hard working, eager beaver type." Rikki shoved another bite of burger into her mouth. "So I don't have to face Dan again."

"So you didn't take a lunch break today." Zane nodded.

"Right." Rikki swallowed. "And it was fine! No one said a word to me about mermaids."

"And you're starved." Zane laughed as he watched her eating.

"I'll live." Rikki raised her shoulders. "But I do think this job might work out. I mean-"

The doorbell rang, cutting her off.

Both Rikki's and Zane's eyes flew open at the sound. They stared at the door, waiting for whoever was waiting outside to walk away.

"Brittany?" A voice called from the other side of the door. "Are you in there?"

Shakily, Rikki moved towards the front door and reached for the knob. Zane silently motioned for her to step back, reaching in front of her to open the door.

"Uh, hey." A very confused Dan stood on the other side of the front door. "The boss asked me to drop off these pages for Brittany to collate, so..." He awkwardly held out the box, shooting Zane a confused look. "You must be the... boyfriend?"

"Brother!" Rikki said brightly as she stepped in front of Zane. "This



is my brother, Chris. Chris, this is Dan from the office." She made a face at Zane, willing him to go along with her story as she took the heavy box from Dan.

"Hey, man." Dan shook Zane's hand. "Don't work too hard." He grinned at Rikki. "I'll see you tomorrow." With that, he turned on his heel and walked down the path towards his car.

"Your \_brother\_?" Zane asked incredulously as he shut the door behind Dan.

"I'm sorry!" Rikki shook her hands frantically. "It's just, he's the one who thought I looked so much like me, like Rikki, and it's common knowlege that Rikki Chadwick is with Zane Bennett, and I didn't want him to recognise you and put two and two together, and I just... panicked." She let out a long exhale, trying not to shake too much with adrenaline.

"Ok then." Zane said simply. "I guess that's that."

\* \* \*

><p>Bella dried herself carefully, waiting for her legs to reappear before standing up and brushing herself off. She'd spent the whole day giving shows at the marine park for Laurie, and she was <em>exhausted<em>.

"Bella, I'm glad I caught you." Laurie jogged up to her, reaching down to help her get to her feet. "I want to introduce you to an old friend of mine. This is-"

"Marie." The smiling blonde took a step forward, extending her hand for Bella to shake.

"Marie." Bella smiled at the vaguely familiar face. She'd seen her before somewhere, hadn't she? "I'm Bella."

"It's so nice to meet you, Bella." Marie grinned somewhat stiffly back at her. "I used to work here at the park, Laurie said he wouldn't mind introducing us. I hope I'm not imposing on your time."

"Not at all." Bella took a step back, looking around for Will. "You know... I could swear we've met before. You look so familiar."

"So do you." Marie said with a laugh. "But I suppose that's because you're a celebrity."

"Yeah, maybe." Bella couldn't shake the feeling that she knew the girl in front of her, but she just couldn't place her. Will appeared at her side, apologizing for being late. "It's nice to meet you." She nodded at Marie before walking off towards the locker room with Will.

\* \* \*

><p><em>"Marie<em>?" Ash frowned as he approached the blonde. His hands were shoved deeply into his pockets as he leaned against the metal railing.

"It's my middle name." Emma said bitterly.

"Ah, I was wondering!" Laurie laughed heartily, slapping Ash lightly on the back. "I'll see you tomorrow, yes?"

"You betcha." Emma replied, watching as Laurie walked back towards the main gate. She turned back to Ash, who was waiting for an explanation.

"I thought you were mad at her." He asked, shrugging his shoulders.

"I'm not mad at her." Emma walked casually back towards their car. "I'm... mad at all three of them. But it seems like they've kept me a secret. I mean, no one seems to have any idea that I'm" She lowered her voice to a whisper. "That I'm a mermaid too."

"Right." Ash nodded. "So what are you doing with Laurie?"

"He's offered me a job as park supervisor." Emma smiled confidently. "And I'm going to take it."

"Are you sure that's smart?" Ash asked worriedly. "I mean, just a splash of water at the wrong time..."

"I'll be fine." Emma shot him a sharp look. "I just want to make sure no one knows about me. This is my home, I don't want to have to constantly wonder if I'm about to be discovered."

"Fair enough." Ash held her tightly. "Don't worry. It seems like they've all done a pretty good job keeping you a secret."

\* \* \*

><p>"I'm sorry work went so late today." Bella apologized as she set her purse down. "Thank you for waiting."<p>

"It's no problem." Will seemed preoccupied as he hung his keys on the hook beside the door.

"But..." Bella smiled brightly. "I have all day off tomorrow. And I want to spend the whole twenty four hours with you." She pulled Will's face towards hers for a kiss.

"Bella..." Will pulled away abruptly. "Listen, there's something I need to tell you."

"Yes?" Bella's heart stopped for a beat as she looked at the expression on Will's face.

Will's voice sounded strained as he finally spoke. "I need a break. Bella..." He had a pained look on his face as he took her hand in his. "I'm not sure I can do this anymore."

End  
file.